

STAYING CONNECTED: TCEQ'S INTERNET PRESENCE GROWS with Its Available Online Resources

As the world increasingly relies on the Internet, the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality also has improved its online presence as an effective method of educating the public while advancing government transparency. In an effort to further increase functionality and offer easy navigation around the 12,710 Web pages and 75,325 documents maintained on the TCEQ website, the agency unveiled an updated Web design in 2013, supporting viewing on desktop, tablet, or mobile devices.

In the Beginning, There Were Bulletin Boards

It's hard to comprehend that instant information, accessible from your home (or cellphone!), and originating from anywhere around the world, wasn't always available. An excerpt from a newsletter of our predecessor agency, the Texas Natural Resource Conservation Commission, serves to illustrate what online information was like, just 19 years ago:

The TNRCC OnLine is a computerized on-line bulletin board system for accessing information about the Texas Natural Resource Conservation Commission and

the environmental services the agency provides. This system operates on any PC compatible computer. It supports up to 14,400 baud modems and follows the most common communication settings: NO parity; 8 databits; 1 stopbit; FULL duplex (N,8,1,F). Downloaded data is provided in ASCII or Word Perfect zipped and unzipped format. ... Users who call from outside of the Austin area may incur long distance calling charges.

*—Water District Update
(TNRCC newsletter, 1995)*

"In 1992 the then Texas Water Commission started its first initiative to accept customer files electronically," says Dorca Zaragoza-Stone, the deputy director of the TCEQ's Office of Administrative Services. "In April of that year, the TCEQ received its first electronic report via the State of Texas Environmental Electronic Reporting System, or STEERS.

"At that time, STEERS was run from a desktop computer using a Paradox application. The application was distributed to customers on 3.5-inch disks and used a bulletin-board system (BBS) for communication between the customer and agency."

"It was taking weeks to update the information," said former TNRCC staffer

TCEQ Web Presence, FY 2013: Snapshots

Total visits: 1,750,000

The 8 countries with the most visits (in order): United States, India, Canada, Mexico, Philippines, United Kingdom, Malaysia, China

The 8 cities with the most visits (in order): Austin, Houston, Dallas, San Antonio, Fort Worth, New York City, Corpus Christi, El Paso

The 7 pages generating the most visits (in order): home page, licensing, jobs, water quality, business permitting requirements, forms search, air quality

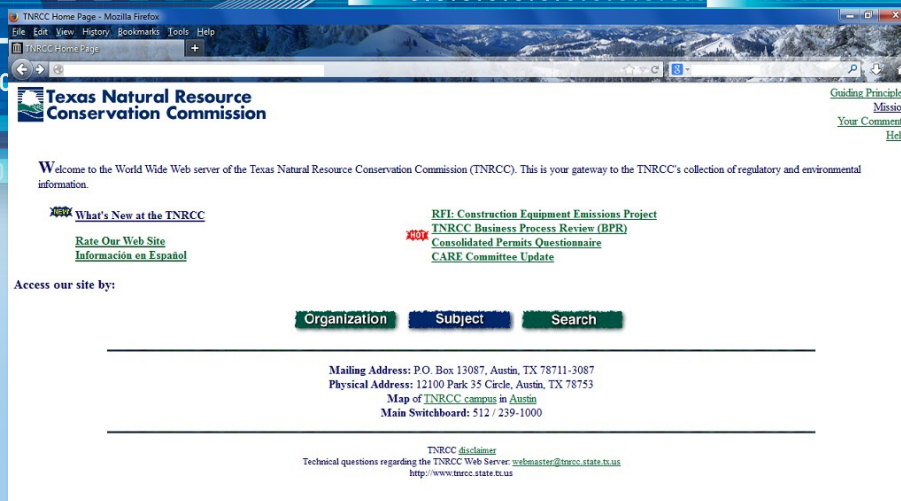
Reach: Every country on the Earth had at least one visitor to the TCEQ website, with one exception: Greenland

Primary language: Of the 1,750,000 visitors, 3,000 had their browser's primary language set to Spanish, 2,000 to Chinese, 1,200 French, 900 Japanese, and 650 Korean.

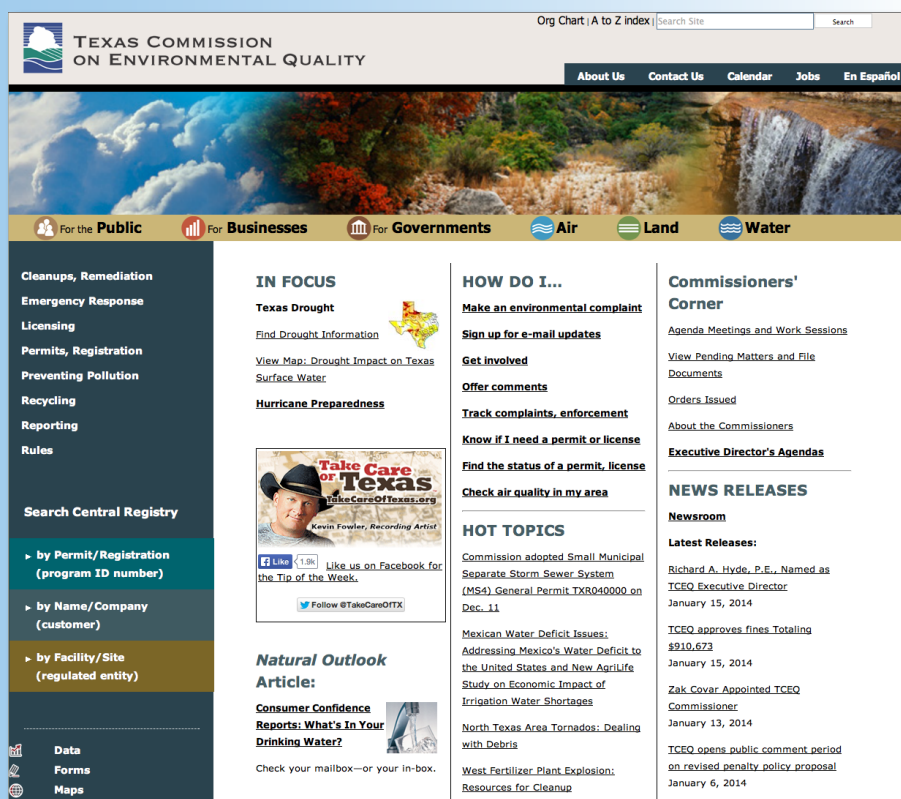
High search ranking: The TCEQ's site ranks 2,136 out of more than 30 million website domains.

Sources: Google Analytics and SiteInSEO.com

Greg Nudd. "I had been working with other groups outside the agency to develop websites, and suggested to [then TNRCC Deputy Director and later Executive Director] Jeff Saitas that



TNRCC website, 1996



TCEQ website, 2014

TCEQ Online: Snapshots

ePay | The TCEQ initiated ePay in 2004. Since then, it has handled 145,922 transactions, processing \$47,518,588.85 in payments.

ORBPS | The Online Registration of Boat Sewage and Pumpout Stations (ORBPS) system went online in 2011. Since then, it has handled 1,681 new requests and 787 renewals.

I&HW Registration | Since 2002, the Industrial and Hazardous Waste Registration and Reporting Program has processed 30,582 Annual Waste Summary reports and 23,649 Waste Receipt Summary reports.

continues to develop online applications and Web pages for the regulated community and the general public. With a few strokes on a keyboard and a click of a mouse, anyone can apply for permits and registrations, renew licenses, submit regulatory reports, file documents, and submit comments, as well as pay fees, penalties, and other assessments—all online, through [TCEQ e-Services](#).

Gone too is the old STEERS BBS system, which was replaced with a more efficient Web version in 2002. “In 1992, when we began using the bulletin boards, there were about 12 users and we processed about 4 to 5 files for each user per month,” says OAS Team Leader, and one of the original STEERS developers, Jessica Ogle. “Since the rollout of the Web version in 2002, the number of users has grown to 13,058.”

All together, there are currently 23 online processes available to the public and those doing business with the TCEQ. “Accepting the information electronically has provided multiple benefits to both the customers and TCEQ,” says Zaragoza-Stone. “We have reduced the volume of paper that has to be processed and stored,

we also have a website. He liked the idea, as long as we included the entire agency.”

Over the course of several months, agency employees interested in HTML coding put their heads together and, after some trial and error, unveiled the official agency website. The design was simple, contained multiple lists, and was absent of any graphics, but it allowed the public convenient computer access to the second-largest environmental agency in the United States.

“It was definitely a very grassroots effort,” said John Tate, of the Office of Administrative Services, who was one of the original members of the coding group. “We’ve come a long way.”

Today, We Have the Whole Wide World

Responding to the ever-growing general dependence on the Internet for both business and information needs, the TCEQ

and there have been overall improved efficiencies and accuracy of information processed. One of the most significant improvements has been the quality-assurance checks performed on data prior to allowing the customer to submit it.”

While the main duties of the TCEQ are regulatory, providing information and education resources to the general public is also a vital component of its responsibilities. In an effort to bolster transparency, the agency has made it possible for visitors to the agency website to review air- and water-quality data, enforcement reports, and the status of permits and registrations, as well as make and review environmental complaints.

With the advent of text messaging, the agency has further expanded its online resources by offering automatic alerts to anyone wanting immediate updates on many of the TCEQ’s programs. Subscribers can receive notifications by either e-mail or text messaging for more than 160 topics, at no charge.



View environmental data, including air and water quality, enforcement reports, and permit status

www.tceq.texas.gov/agency/data



Sign up for E-mail or Text Alerts

www.tceq.texas.gov/news/aggregator/aggregator/email.html

And Now, Social Media

An increasing number of state agencies have expanded their online presence by using YouTube and other social-media sites, including Twitter and Facebook.

In 2013, the agency used these resources to tout its revamped Take Care of Texas program. Headlined by

country-music star Kevin Fowler, who provided a catchy public-service-announcement jingle to go along with the roll-out, the statewide consumer conservation program saw an upsurge in participation.

“Word travels much faster on the Internet, and undoubtedly social media, including all of Kevin’s own Twitter and Facebook followers, was instrumental in the increased awareness of the Take Care of Texas program,” said TCEQ Commissioner Zak Covar.

As a result of the outreach, more than one million TCOT publications and related materials were sent out to individuals wanting to learn how to do their part to conserve water and energy.



Take Care of Texas on Facebook

<https://www.facebook.com/TakeCareofTexas>



Take Care of Texas on Twitter

<https://twitter.com/TakeCareOfTX>

Through the YouTube channel TCEQNews, viewers can see drought maps, learn about the tools used to monitor the state’s air, and meet the latest winners of the Texas Environmental Excellence Awards.

“YouTube has become an increasingly important public-information tool for our agency,” said Andy Saenz, director of the Agency Communications Division. “By sharing these regularly uploaded videos, we hope to present an expanded view of the work we do here.”

TCEQNews is also the name of the agency’s official Twitter account, where followers can learn about the latest news releases, read announcements, and follow posts from agency officials, including Chairman Bryan W. Shaw, Ph.D., P.E., who used the microblog during last year’s Valley Environmental Summit.

Commissioner Toby Baker has also embraced this method of networking with the public through both his Twitter and Facebook pages (ctobybaker). “My goal, with using social media, is to provide some personal insight into what we do here at the agency,” he said. “We are doing incredible work for the environment of Texas, and have a great story to tell.”

Commissioner Baker says that using social media has allowed the agency to reach more people, including those who might not be familiar with the scope of the agency and its responsibilities.

“Since our duties are regulatory in nature, and follow the laws set before us, we are often subject to critical review not based on fact. While social media allows an outlet for anyone to post an opinion of us, we plan to use that same outlet to educate, inform, and set the record straight, if need be.” 🇹🇽

TCEQ Social Media on the Web



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